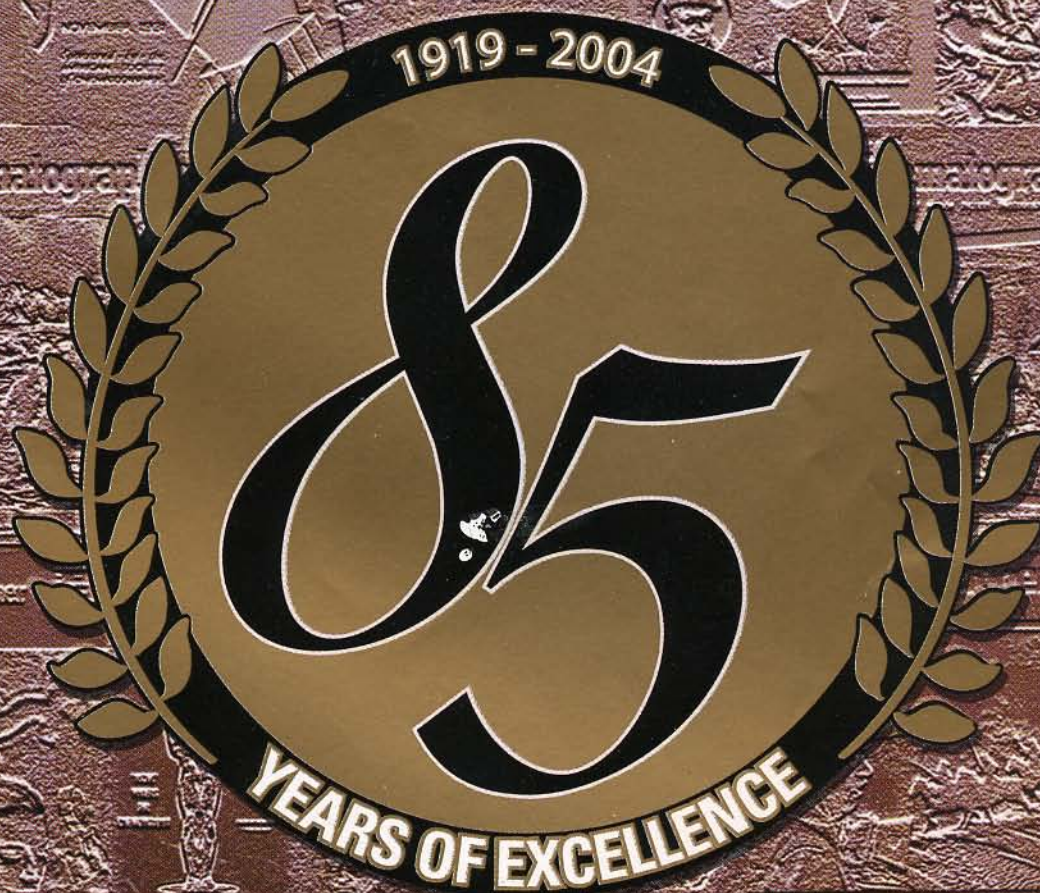


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# American Cinematographer

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# Production Slate

## Timeless Films of Modern Vintage

by Jean Oppenheimer

Narcissa (Maria de Medeiros) and Chester (Mark McKinney) are among the strange characters who populate *The Saddest Music in the World*, shot by Luc Montpellier, CSC and directed by Guy Maddin.



Three years after wrapping production on *The Saddest Music in the World*, director of photography Luc Montpellier, CSC still describes the experience as "the most unique of my career — and anybody who has ever worked on a Guy Maddin film would say the same thing."

In addition to *The Saddest Music*, Maddin's idiosyncratic output includes *Dracula: Pages From a Virgin's Diary*, *Tales From the Gimli Hospital*, *Archangel*, *Careful* and *Heart of the World*. Indeed, he is one of the few filmmakers working today whose aesthetic would fit as neatly into the pages of the first *American Cinematographer*, published in 1920, as in any current issue of the magazine. The techniques and

conventions he employs pay homage to early classical cinema, notably Hollywood's silent era, German Expressionism and the work of Eisenstein and Pudovkin.

Maddin shot most of his early shorts and features with a secondhand Bolex that he purchased for \$7 in 1986. He says the camera was cheap because it had an irreparable light leak. "[There was] a half-moon of fog on the right side of the frame," he says, adding that it was this flaw that inspired his visual style.

The majority of Maddin's pictures have been shot in black-and-white on Super 8mm, 16mm or Super 16mm, or a combination of the three. They are filled with vignettes; irises in and out; overlap-

ping action; intentionally degraded images and sound; intertitles; hard, frequently blown-out light; and halated images produced by the old-school art of smearing Vaseline onto the lens. "Guy wants [his films] to look and feel as if they've been in a vault for a hundred years," notes Montpellier. "Old film prints degrade naturally through time, and Guy re-creates that look through sets, lighting and camerawork." Adds Paul Suderman, who photographed *Dracula: Pages From a Virgin's Diary*, "The more degraded the image, the better Guy likes it."

*Dracula* was made for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) but was later released theatrically. The picture is a filmed version of the

Photos courtesy of IFC Films, Zeitgeist Films and the Canadian Broadcasting Corp.



**This shot of beer baroness Lady Helen Port-Huntly (Isabella Rossellini) illustrates Montpellier's use of heavy filtration, which included Fog filters and Tiffen White Pro-Mists.**

Winnipeg Ballet's production of Bram Stoker's celebrated novel. "Ballet is traditionally seen from one angle, the angle of the audience," notes Suderman. "We broke that rule. We approached the project as if we were shooting a dramatic narrative, and the actors just happened to be dancing."

*Dracula* was shot with five cameras: an Arriflex 16SR-3 with an Angenieux zoom, two spring-wound 16mm Bolexes, and a pair of Super 8 cameras. Suderman operated the Arri, which was responsible for the majority of the coverage, and Maddin and a third operator received the union's permission to run in with the other cameras to film inserts. Suderman recalls that the Arri was almost always mounted on a Fisher 10 dolly, sometimes on a jib arm that allowed him to float the camera. "At times, I held the camera on the jib, operating it while standing on the ground," he says. "I could pan about 300 degrees and walk in a small circle around the dolly, and could crane up and down by raising or lowering the camera. We had an under-slung Ronford F7 Head on the end of the jib that allowed me to put the camera right on the ground and then bring it up to 6 feet, 2 inches in the air in

one continuous motion, [which helped because I was] always trying to keep the extremely mobile dancers in the frame. I give a lot of credit to choreographer Mark Godden, who was able to instantly shift his choreography so it worked better for the camera."

Working exclusively with Eastman Double-X 7222 black-and-white stock, Suderman created a slightly degraded look by adding a stack of white and black Tiffen Pro-Mist filters. Vaseline or K-Y Jelly was often smeared onto a clear filter in front of the lens on the Arri. "Depending upon the thickness of the goop and the direction in which you smear it, light can refract through the filter any way you choose," notes Suderman.

Maddin likes high-contrast lighting, ideally a single harsh source that quickly trails off into darkness. Suderman overexposed his key light by one to three stops and let the highlights bloom. "Add that to the Pro-Mists and the Vaseline, and you have photons bouncing all over the place, which gives the imagery a primitive look," he says. "The most extreme stuff was reserved for *Dracula's* castle, where we wanted really deep blacks."



**Above (from left):** Montpellier, Rossellini and Maddin confer on set. **Below:** On the set of *Dracula: Pages From a Virgin's Diary*, director of photography Paul Suderman (back to camera) and focus puller Len Petersen zero in on Van Helsing (David Moroni).

When the Bolexes swooped in for coverage, electrician John Clarke, who was anointed the "dedicated lamp man," would sometimes run in with an additional 1K. Carrying a battery pack and inverter, he was a self-sufficient, self-powered unit and could focus the light on whatever was being filmed at the time.

*Dracula* was shot in an old warehouse, and one of its most spectacular sets is the bedroom/living area of the vampire's first victim, Lucy (played by

ballerina Tara Birtwhistle). A bank of windows lined an entire wall, and the crew blasted a stack of 10K tungsten fixtures through them. By smearing Vaseline on the lens, the filmmakers were able to make the shafts of light radiate off of the dancer's body as she moved. A spotlight motivated by a nearby lighthouse rakes the room; for shots in which the lighthouse was visible in frame, best boy Rob A. Rowan rigged an MR16 bulb into the top of a small model of the lighthouse. When the light-

house was out of frame, the effect was achieved by panning a 20K tungsten fixture across the back of the room.

Based on a script by novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Saddest Music in the World* concerns Lady Helen Port-Huntly (Isabella Rossellini), a legless beer baroness who dons a pair of glass legs filled with beer and plies her trade in Depression-era Winnipeg. After she decides to stage a contest to determine the most melancholy music in the world, competitors arrive from every corner of the globe—including three members of one family who are locked in a juicy melodrama of their own. They are Fyodor (David Fox), who loves Helen but amputated her legs in a drunken rage; his son, Chester (Mark McKinney), who stole Helen from him and then abandoned her; and his other son, Roderick (Ross McMillan), a morose recluse who is actually married to Chester's girlfriend, Narcissa.

Montpellier shot the picture's dialogue sequences with a converted Arriflex 16SR-2, while Maddin used his handy Bolex. Other crew members (and sometimes even the actors) took turns shooting with assorted Super 8 cameras. "We had about 10 Super 8s on hand because the loads are only two minutes," explains Montpellier. "We needed to be able to just pick one up and go."

Montpellier did a lot of research to find the right lens for the Arri, and he eventually located an Angenieux 10-150mm zoom at the Toronto rental agency Production Services. "Super 16 has a 1.77:1 ratio and 16mm is 1.66:1, so when I zoomed out fully, I got a natural vignette in camera," recalls the cinematographer. "I knew that would come in handy because Guy uses lots of cardboard vignettes." Montpellier could tell that the lens coating had faded quite a bit, and that it had a few loose rings and a couple of scratches. "It just felt right, and it ended up treating the light in a kind of halated way that proved perfect. It made all of the highlights glow." He used an array of filtration with the lens, including Fog #4, Tiffen White Pro-Mists, a black net and a spot filter.



*Dracula* photo by Bruce Monk.



Using his own secondhand Bolex, Maddin captures some action for *Dracula*.

One of the primary visual references for *Saddest Music* was Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). "The whole glow behind that film became a key feature of our film," says Montpellier. "I found fishnet stocking material in a fabric shop and glued sequins on it. Every time we wanted that effect, I'd place the material so close to the camera that the thread was out of focus. I would operate the camera with one hand, and in the other hand I held a 300-watt Fresnel that I would randomly shine on the sequins until I found the perfect angle. I also used a star filter and, on top of all that, Vaseline on the lens."

Montpellier changed the filters on a shot-by-shot basis to create an intentional discontinuity — jumps in exposure, grain and contrast akin to classical early cinema. Some of the jumps were the result of intercutting the different formats, but at times the cinematographer would start a scene with normal exposure and then Maddin would ask him to suddenly push one stop. Montpellier sometimes changed the magazine in the middle of a scene, "even after a take, so we'd have grain fluctuations within the Super 16 sync-sound footage."

The main stock on *Saddest Music*

was Eastman Double-X 7222, and Montpellier shot a couple of color sequences with Vision 800T 7289, which he rated at 1600 ISO to create more grain and texture. "It was really important to *feel* the film going through the camera," he says. The Super 8 stocks were Tri-X Reversal 7278 and Ektachrome 7240 Color Reversal.

The footage was processed at Alphacine motion-picture lab in Toronto and then transferred to DigiBeta at Magnetic North. "The images were so degraded that we didn't need to go to a high-resolution format," Montpellier notes with a laugh. The film was finished with a digital intermediate at Film Effects.

*Saddest Music* was shot in the middle of winter inside an old steel mill, and the space was so vast that heaters simply couldn't warm it. Consequently, the temperature within the structure was -40°C. "It created a lot of nice atmosphere," quips Montpellier. "You could see people's breaths all the time." He adds that an unintended but ultimately rewarding consequence of the intense cold was that the Bolex would start to slow down mid-take, which yielded unusual imagery.

The production built three main

sets for *Saddest Music*: the brewery, Lady Helen's office and a small street. The entire film takes place at night, and the filmmakers designed lighting plans that would facilitate shooting in 360 degrees.

The brewery set presented one major problem: one wall featured windows that shaped light in a way Montpellier and Maddin loved, but because the story takes place at night, it appeared that the windows would have to be blackened. "Guy and I both flipped over the look of that light coming in and wanted to use it, despite the nighttime setting," says Montpellier. "That is a perfect example of how Vaseline can be used not only as a great effect, but also to hide certain parts of the frame. We just dabbed a little Vaseline onto the lens where the windows would be, and we suddenly had a halo. All you see is this beautiful light source streaking in the frame; you can't tell it's coming from windows."

To create the impression of a working brewery in the background, Montpellier used shadow play. To suggest a conveyor belt of beer, the props department glued bottles onto a Lazy Susan turntable, and the cinematographer tested various lights before determining that a 5K open-faced Renoir (with its reflector painted black) created the crispest shadow.

Creating such shadows wasn't easy. Production designer Matthew Davies built two 30'-high projection screens that were positioned 20' above the floor, and two 50' aluminum towers were placed behind the screens. Behind the towers were two Genies that each held four Renoirs. Props such as the Lazy Susan and the bottles were positioned on the towers, and the light and shadows were manipulated by moving the fixtures up and down on the lifts.

The walls of the set for Lady Helen's office were made of TransLite material, which Montpellier backlit with 2K Blondes to create a glow. Semi-translucent white material was stretched across the ceiling and a chandelier was placed in the middle of it; Montpellier hung a ring of 2K Fresnels



**Maddin pays homage to silent film with a variety of techniques, as these shots from his new film, *Cowards Bend the Knee* (top left), and *Dracula* demonstrate.**



around the outer set walls to make the ceiling glow, and he again used the Renoirs to create some shadow play.

The cinematographer typically overexposed actors' faces by three stops to get the glowing skin tones he and Maddin liked, and he augmented the look with Fog and White Pro-Mist filters. He used Vaseline to further halate the edges of the frame.

To simulate moonlight for the street scenes and accommodate different shooting directions, Montpellier hung four 20K Big-Eye Fresnels from the warehouse ceiling. He also placed smaller Fresnels in the windows of the set's off-scale houses and created pools of streetlamp light with Source Four Lekos overhead. The set was pre-lit in all four directions in an attempt to keep the pace of the production moving forward, and all of the lamps were controlled with a dimmer board. (The lights were rented from Production Services in Winnipeg.)

The filmmakers needed to get 80 to 100 setups a day, and Montpellier marvels that focus puller Len Petersen, a regular member of Maddin's crew,

never took actual measurements. "I give a lot of credit to Len," says the cinematographer, "as well as to Guy's regular gaffer, Michael Drabot, and key grip Francois Balcaen, who was working with Guy for the first time."

Montpellier reserves his most lavish praise for Maddin: "Nobody in the world is doing what Guy is doing. He marries opposing styles as a dramatic tool, as well as to create a sense of discontinuity. The scenes between Chester and Helen are constructed with the extremely melodramatic movies of the 1930s in mind, only to be interrupted with handheld reaction shots characteristic of Pudovkin and Eisenstein. Helen's last number is shot in the spirit of the classical Hollywood musical but is intercut with camera angles found in German Expressionism. Working with Guy brought me back to the basics of filmmaking, which is why I loved the experience." ■